The Original Women of Spirit

The stories of twelve Sisters of Mercy who inspire our university

Carlow University
Mercy -
The Principal Path
Catherine McAuley
Sister Clare Besterman

Sister Clare Besterman, the creator of the Mount Mercy College seal, was born Miss Julia Besterman of Sewickley. She was one of 13 children and became a Sister of Mercy over her parents’ objections.

Sister Clare was artistically gifted, not only as a painter but as a pianist and singer as well. She received a bachelor’s degree in art from the University of Notre Dame and a master’s from Carnegie Institute of Technology. Affected by an infection which destroyed her hip joint, she wore a heavy brace from hip to ankle. Returning from the hospital with this devise, she set up her studio and welcomed her students. When the pain from her hip became severe, she would sit at the piano and sing.

Sister Clare founded the college’s art department.

Mother Rose Curran

Mother Rose began her ministerial career in education but was soon attracted to the nursing profession. She graduated from Mercy Hospital School of Nursing and joined the clinical staff at the hospital. In 1923, she became administrator and served in that position for eleven years. During Mother Rose's tenure she became widely known and admired for her skill in administration. She received national recognition for her work in the Catholic Hospital Association.

In 1934, Mother Rose was elected Mother Superior of the Sisters of Mercy. She served in this position for six years, during which she was the titular head of the college. In 1942, in collaboration with Sister Francis Xavier O'Reilly, a brilliant teacher and chair of the biology department, she was instrumental in founding the college’s nursing department.

Mother Rose is remembered as having a Celtic wit, a hearty laugh, broad vision and a discerning mind. Curran Hall is named in her honor.

Mother Irenaeus Dougherty

Mother Irenaeus Dougherty, co-founder of Mount Mercy College, was one of the most influential leaders of the Sisters of Mercy at a pivotal time in their history. She was known for her superior intellect, resolute character, and compassionate leadership. These qualities made her a strong administrator who could make difficult decisions and see them through, while addressing the needs of women and the importance of their education. Mother Irenaeus was elected Mother Superior of the Sisters of Mercy on three separate occasions. At the same time, she was titular president of Mount Mercy College for 18 years during which time enrollment increased by 600 percent. Aquinas, Trinity and Antonian Halls were all built during her tenure. Dougherty Hall is named in her honor.

Mother Irenaeus was a close friend of Saint Katherine Drexel who made her novitiate with the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy before founding her own community—the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.
Sister Aiden Flynn

Sister Aiden brought music to our campus. She was instrumental in developing the music department and directed the college glee club for almost 20 years. She is best remembered for the operettas she produced, drawing on the talents of her students and of young men from nearby universities. “The Mikado” was the first of ten Gilbert and Sullivan operettas performed here. Under her direction, the glee club presented concerts around Pittsburgh and in New York City. One of its final concerts with Sister Aiden was a joint performance with the male chorus of Georgetown University.

Sister Aiden’s death by drowning at the sisters’ vacation house in New Jersey shocked and saddened the college community and all who had enjoyed the fruit of her work in developing the musical talents of Mount Mercy students. Aidan Hall is named in her honor.

Catherine McAuley

Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy, was born in 1778 in the city of Dublin, Ireland. She spent 20 years of her life with an elderly couple, the Callaghans, for whom she provided companionship and assistance in managing their household and estate. During this time, she also began a ministry to persons living in poverty and taught needlework to women to provide them with a means of earning a living.

At the death of the Callaghans, Catherine was amazed to find that they had bequeathed their home and fortune to her. Instead of seeing this beneficence as an opportunity to assure her own security, Catherine used it to build a social service center for women and children in the heart of one of Dublin’s affluent neighborhoods. The choice of location flowed from her desire to acquaint the wealthy with the plight of those who were poor. Other women were attracted to Catherine’s work and joined her ministry. Eventually, at the urging of the bishop, Catherine agreed to found a religious order and on December 12, 1831, the Sisters of Mercy came into being—the first religious to leave the cloister and minister to persons in need wherever they were found. Central to Catherine’s encompassing compassion for the poor persons, was a particular concern for women. Catherine held the conviction that the education of women was essential to the renewal of society. McAuley Hall is named in her honor.
Sister Regis Grace

Together with Mother Irenaeus Dougherty, Sister Regis M. Grace was the co-founder of Mount Mercy College in 1929. She was its first academic dean and a professor of philosophy and classical languages. She served as acting president for 22 years. Sister Regis earned her B.A. from Catholic University, an M.A. from the University of Notre Dame and Ph.D. in philosophy from Saint Vincent College—the first woman to be granted such a degree from that institution. She pursued post-doctoral work at Columbia, Harvard and Oxford.

On September 24, 1929, at the height of the Great Depression, with no buildings and scant resources, Sister Regis and Mother Irenaeus opened Mount Mercy with a freshman class of 24 students and a faculty of five. The first classes were held in St. Mary’s Convent and Our Lady of Mercy Academy—now Tiernan Hall. What the college lacked in material resources was compensated for by Sister Regis’ vision, courage, experience, administrative skill, personality, and deep spirituality. She knew every student by name and had a personal relationship with each faculty member.

Alumnae will never forget Sister Regis’s Monday morning discussions with the entire student body. She offered a practical philosophy of living based on personal integrity, the value of decision and mature commitment and above all the absolute necessity of leadership among Christian women. She listened to a freshman with the same respect she offered a professor.

Under Sister Regis’ direction the college was incorporated by the State of Pennsylvania and, in 1941, was granted national accreditation. By 1952, the year she left the college, the student enrollment had grown by 600 percent, the faculty by 99 percent, the library had increased from a few donated books to 32,000 volumes and five new college buildings had been erected. By the time of her departure, the college had extended a college education to more than 200 religious women, a way, thought, Sister Regis, of advancing the work of the Church. As her last official act as dean, Sister Regis established permanent scholarships to be granted to each religious congregation.

When Middle States evaluated the college in 1952 they noted that Sister Regis was the dean of instruction, coordinator of programs, the immediate supervisor of every department head and the dean of women. She also had a supervisory relationship with the business and public relations offices and she personally cleared every admission. All this without a secretary! She, more than anyone else, is responsible for the founding, growth and development of the college.

Sister Regis was greatly respected in the Pittsburgh community for her dedication to the education of women and for her liberal educational views. The university library is named in her honor.
Sister Philip Neri McCarthy

Thanks to Sister Philip Neri McCarthy, Mount Mercy College opened in 1929 with record keeping systems and secretarial services in place. Before entering the community of the Sisters of Mercy, she worked as a secretary for United States Steel. In 1932 she earned a master’s degree in business administration from Duquesne University. In the 12 years that she taught in the college she also developed a four year secretarial services curriculum. Before joining the college professional staff and faculty, she taught in several parish grade schools of the Diocese of Pittsburgh and in three high schools staffed by the Sisters of Mercy as well as at Mercy Hospital.

Across the bottom of her ministry form for the community, Sister Philip Neri wrote in red ink, “I was one of the first faculty members of Mount Mercy College!”

Sister Eustochia McCarthy

Sister Eustochia is described as being a scholar with a keen intellect and authority in her chosen field. She was one of eight Sisters of Mercy assigned to study at Holy Ghost College (Duquesne University). She later continued her studies at Catholic University of America and the University of Pittsburgh where she earned an M.A. She taught English and French at the college, where she served not only on the faculty but on the board of trustees as well.

She is described as having a certain simulated gruffness, a directness of speech, a secret delight in saying common things in a shocking way. To a student arriving late for class she might say, “Good afternoon, you wretch.” It was that wonderful sense of humor, combined with her sympathetic understanding of people, that was perhaps her most outstanding characteristic.

Sister Eustochia was one of the college’s original faculty members and her time and talents were always at the service of her Sisters and her girls. She never failed to give herself generously.

Mother Aquinas Ragan

Mother Aquinas was a woman of diverse talent – teaching music, nursing the sick, caring for children at St. Paul’s Orphanage, serving as superintendent of the Home for Working Girls. She first conceived the idea for a Catholic women’s college and began to prepare sisters for positions in the faculty and administration. She enlisted Sister Regis Grace to design a plan for what would become Mount Mercy College. History records of her: “All her work was marked by vigor and energy which were characteristic of her. No detail was too small for her close scrutiny, no reasonable expenditure too great to daunt her spirit of progressiveness.” Aquinas Hall is named in her honor.
Sister Fides Shepperson

Sister Fides Shepperson was born into a Protestant family in Danville, Pa. in 1867. She became a Catholic in 1886 and entered the Sisters of Mercy in 1888. As a young sister she taught in schools for the children of African American families on Wylie Avenue. She was a cultured, scholarly woman who emphasized higher education of women.

In 1929, after several years of teaching in high schools, she joined the faculty of Mount Mercy College as a history professor. She graduated from Holy Ghost College (now Duquesne University) in 1911, the first woman to be awarded a B.A. from that institution. After a year of study at Catholic University, she enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh, where she became, in 1923, the first woman to earn a Ph.D. in Philosophy. She was recognized for “her wide knowledge of classical literature, history, philosophy and astronomy...” Widely known as a writer, she was deeply concerned with human rights and international peace. She founded the Society of Saint Francis on campus, an organization whose mission was to promote “world peace based on humane education in the schools.” She often spoke on KDKA radio. Duquesne University honored Sister Fides’ place in their history by naming a room for her in the Power Center.

Sister Fides was one of the college’s original faculty members.

Sister Xavier Tiernan

At the first Christmas Mass celebrated by the Sisters of Mercy in Pittsburgh, the flowers on the altar were donated by Eliza Jane Tiernan. One month later, in February 1844, she became the first woman to enter the community in the United States. She was well educated and came from a distinguished Pittsburgh family. Sister Xavier served as director of novices and also ministered at Mercy Hospital. In 1848, she contracted erysipelas while nursing victims of a cholera epidemic and died. She is remembered as a woman of prudence, wisdom and determination. Tiernan Hall is named in her honor.

Mother Frances Warde

Frances Warde met Catherine McAuley in Dublin at the age of 16. For the next 15 years, until Catherine’s death in 1841, they worked tirelessly spreading the flame of compassionate service to the poor. On November 4, 1943, after agreeing to serve with Bishop Michael O’Connor, the newly appointed first bishop of Pittsburgh, Frances Warde and six companions left Carlow, Ireland for Pittsburgh.

For the next 40 years, Frances was responsible for founding 106 institutions—schools, convents, hospitals, social service agencies all across the United States. In 1966, on the occasion of the City of Pittsburgh’s Bicentennial, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania recognized her extraordinary contribution by naming her one of the 10 most influential women in the history of the Pittsburgh region. Frances Warde Hall is named in her honor.